United Nations A/55/212

General Assembly

Distr.: General
31 July 2000

Original: English

Fifty-fifth session
Item 20 (b) of the provisional agenda*
Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance: special economic assistance to individual countries or regions

International cooperation and coordination for the human and ecological rehabilitation and economic development of the Semipalatinsk region of Kazakhstan

Report of the Secretary-General**

I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 52/169 M of 16 December 1997, the General Assembly invited the international community to contribute to the human and ecological rehabilitation and economic development of the Semipalatinsk region of Kazakhstan. In addition, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to prepare a report in order to assist the Government in the formulation of an overall action plan to address the humanitarian, ecological and economic needs of the region, which had formerly been used as a nuclear testing ground.

2. The United Nations country team in Kazakhstan, under the leadership of the United Nations Resident Coordinator and the Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), responded to the appeal in a timely manner. In order to assist the Government of Kazakhstan in the formulation of a recommended overall action plan to address the humanitarian, ecological and economic problems and needs of the region, a joint needs assessment mission was deployed from 15 to 30 June 1998. Participating in the mission were 20 international and 50 national experts. As a result of the mission, an integrated programme framework, consisting of 38 priority project proposals in the areas of health, humanitarian aid, ecology, economy and information dissemination, was prepared.

3. The report of the Secretary-General on international cooperation and coordination for the human and ecological rehabilitation and economic development of the Semipalatinsk region of Kazakhstan (A/53/424) led to the adoption by the General Assembly of its resolution 53/1 H of 16 November 1998. In that resolution the Assembly stressed the need for greater international attention and extra efforts in solving problems with regard to the region and its population; invited all States, relevant organizations and other entities of the international community, including non-governmental organizations, to share their knowledge and experience in order to contribute to the human and ecological rehabilitation and economic development of the region; and invited all Member States, in particular donor States and

* A/55/150.

** The footnote requested by the General Assembly in its resolution 54/248 was not included in the submission.

00-58735 (E) 050900

relevant organs and organizations of the United Nations system, to participate in the rehabilitation of the region. In addition, the Assembly invited the Secretary-General to pursue a consultative process on modalities for mobilizing the necessary support to seek appropriate solutions to the problems and needs of the region.

4. Since the adoption of the General Assembly resolutions, the international community has devoted considerable attention to the situation in the Semipalatinsk region. The Government of Kazakhstan and the United Nations country team in Kazakhstan have jointly initiated a series of consultations with the country's main international partners.

II. Institutional framework for the Semipalatinsk Relief and Rehabilitation Programme

5. In order to better coordinate the provision of external assistance to the Semipalatinsk region, the Government of Kazakhstan established an interministerial commission on Semipalatinsk, chaired by the Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs. The commission consists of representatives from key government agencies, including the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Ecology and Environmental Protection, the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of Industry and Trade and the Ministry of Defence, and a number of important non-governmental organizations, namely Polygon 29 and Nevada-Semipalatinsk. The interministerial commission meets on a regular basis and coordinates implementation of the national programme, as well as external development and humanitarian assistance to the region.

6. In April 1999, five working groups were established for each programme area outlined in the report of the Secretary-General (A/53/424). The main responsibility of the groups was to formulate, with the assistance of international experts provided by the United Nations country team, project proposals in their respective areas. As a result, an integrated Semipalatinsk Relief and Rehabilitation Programme was developed. The programme consists of 38 impact-oriented actions for relief and rehabilitation in five areas of concern: (a) health; (b) environment and ecology; (c) economic recovery; (d) humanitarian issues; and (e) information and advocacy. The programme document was distributed among the donor community prior to the Tokyo International Conference on Semipalatinsk, which was to be held in September 1999.

7. With the support of UNDP, a programme coordination unit was established to coordinate the preparations for the Conference on behalf of the Government of Kazakhstan and UNDP. The unit would report directly to the interministerial commission and would also be responsible for the implementation of follow-up to the Conference.

III. Tokyo International Conference on Semipalatinsk

8. The Tokyo International Conference on Semipalatinsk was one of the principal initiatives taken to follow up the report of the Secretary-General (A/53/424). On the occasion of the consideration by the Assembly of the report of the Secretary-General, the Government of Japan offered to host, jointly with UNDP, an international conference to consider ways of taking the report and its recommendations forward. The Conference was held in Tokyo on 6 and 7 September 1999; it was attended by high-level representatives of the Government of Kazakhstan. Four other United Nations entities shared the sponsoring of the Conference: the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

9. The Conference had the following key objectives:

(a) To raise the awareness of the international community of the current situation in the Semipalatinsk region and the consequences of nuclear testing and to inform participants of the prioritized projects to meet the needs in the Semipalatinsk region;

(b) To appeal to the international community for further assistance to meet the urgent needs in the Semipalatinsk region;

(c) To consider possible cooperation and coordination of the international community and to exchange technical knowledge and experience in the areas of health, ecology, economic rehabilitation and humanitarian support;

(d) To inform participants of the institutional arrangements of Kazakhstan to manage, coordinate, use and account for international assistance and of the commitments and support from government, the private sector and civil society in Kazakhstan.

10. The international interest in the subject was reflected in the fact that more than 200 participants attended the Conference, representing 24 Governments, 12 multilateral organizations, including the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNFPA, UNICEF, the United Nations Environment Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Bank, IAEA, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Six non-governmental organizations and 38 Japanese organizations, institutions and agencies also participated. There was particularly strong interest demonstrated by the involvement of community and professional leaders from Nagasaki, Hiroshima and Semipalatinsk. The international media intensified its efforts to raise awareness about Semipalatinsk and the Conference.

11. At the opening meeting of the Conference, participants heard messages from the Prime Minister of Japan at that time, Keizo Obuchi, the President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan A. Nazarbayev, the Administrator of UNDP and the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator.

12. The Conference conveyed three important messages aimed at improving the effectiveness of the health and medical care provided to the population of the Semipalatinsk region:

(a) There was a need to improve the scientific evidence to be used as a basis for determining priorities and taking action;

(b) There was a need for transparency and accountability, including an improved communication strategy and involvement with the public, as well as better coordination of all national and international participants in the action;

(c) Handling the health-related consequences of people affected by nuclear testing should be seen as part of the broader public health strategy and reforms in Kazakhstan and should be balanced with other health needs in the region, including mother and child health, reproductive, environmental and mental health and communicable disease prevention.

13. While discussing the needs reflected in the integrated rehabilitation programme, consisting of 38 projects prepared by Kazakh and international experts, Conference participants emphasized the following:

(a) There was an urgent need to complete a comprehensive radiological assessment of the Semipalatinsk region and strengthen monitoring and a thorough radiological assessment of the Semipalatinsk nuclear testing site, which had come to be called to Polygon.[1] There were still a number of radioactive hot spots, including underground waters from the post-explosion cavities flowing out to the surface and the potential chemical spill of the transboundary Irtysh River. As the Irtysh flowed into the Arctic circle, the consequences could affect areas outside the region;

(b) It was extremely important to support the rehabilitation of the economy in order to improve prospects for self-help and sustained recovery among the population, in both urban and rural areas, giving special attention to those measures which supported the development of small businesses;

(c) The above-mentioned measures should be complemented by humanitarian assistance for the poorest and most vulnerable population group in the region;

(d) It was necessary to strengthen the capacities of government and other local institutions, including Kazakh non-governmental organizations, so that they could better administer programmes of action and ensure their impact on the most affected population groups;

(e) It was also important to make it possible for people to have access to information that would enable them to avoid risks, reduce psychosocial insecurity, receive guidance and enhance their knowledge of activities.

14. More than US$ 20 million was pledged by Japan, the World Bank, other United Nations entities and the General Board of Global Ministries. Switzerland, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and Counterpart International, a non-governmental organization, also pledged their

assistance for the Semipalatinsk Relief and Rehabilitation Programme.

15. Members of the delegation of Kazakhstan explained how the humanitarian, rehabilitation and development assistance would be utilized, coordinated and managed in order to have the intended benefit in the affected areas.

IV. Donor assistance to the Semipalatinsk region

A. Health sector

16. Projects in the health sector represent the most important part of the Semipalatinsk Relief and Rehabilitation Programme. Japan is one of the largest donors, supporting health-care projects by providing medical equipment to local hospitals and developing local capacities. During the Conference, the Government of Japan promised to study the possibility of assisting in the establishment of screening and treatment systems in order to improve the medical infrastructure available to the affected population and the collection of basic data and the transfer of know-how concerning administrative measures.

17. UNFPA, together with WHO, plans to support a study on the influence of radiation on reproductive health, which will be carried out in 2000. The World Bank has committed its support to health-care projects through a loan of US$ 9 million to the Government of Kazakhstan, which will help the affected population by providing modern equipment to local health-care centres and training local doctors.

18. Internationaler Hilfsfonds, a non-governmental organization, has provided support to a diagnosis and rehabilitation centre for women and had conducted ultrasonic and genetic research concerning pregnant women and the treatment of the affected population with antioxidants.

19. A memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Kazakhstan and the General Board of Global Ministries was signed prior to the Conference. The initiatives of the General Board of Global Ministries, with a total budget of US$ 3 million, are aimed at improving health services in communities affected by nuclear testing and the subsequent closure of the nuclear weapons testing programme. That will be accomplished by supporting a community-based, family-oriented centre for primary health care that is replicable in other areas of the country, implementing effective training programmes, providing management technical assistance for health-care professionals and leveraging existing partnerships, both in the United States of America and in other countries, to mobilize additional resources.

B. Humanitarian sector

20. Internationaler Hilfsfonds and Counterpart International are the most active non-governmental organizations in the humanitarian sector. The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies was active in 1999, particularly through its appeal for winter food, as a result of which 120 persons, among them the elderly, the physically and mentally disabled, and children from families without income received highly nutritional food for a two-month period.

21. The Governments of Switzerland and the United Kingdom have started their humanitarian assistance programme by providing basic medical supplies to health-care and social institutions in the region.

C. Economic sector

22. Programmes in the economic sector are being implemented mostly with the support of UNDP. Jointly with Mercy Corps International, UNDP is supporting women in the Semipalatinsk region through microcredit schemes. The Government of Japan, through its trust fund with UNDP, has pledged an additional contribution of US$ 1.2 million for three projects in support of the following: (a) the expansion of microcredit schemes for women; (b) business skill training; and (c) the provision of small grants for non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations.

23. The business skill training project will support dynamic and efficient small- and medium-sized enterprises that would increasingly contribute to economic growth, the creation of jobs and the generation of income in the Semipalatinsk region. The main objective of the project providing small grants for non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations is to reduce social suffering and the

humanitarian crisis in the region by improving the quality of social services delivered by local non-governmental and community-based organizations. A more healthy non-governmental presence in the region will concentrate skills and help in the mobilization of additional resources while multiplying the impact of already existing programmes.

D. Environmental sector

24. In the environmental sector, the Government of the United Kingdom has pledged to assist in the formulation of a land-use strategy for the areas around the former nuclear test site. Together with the National Nuclear Centre of Kazakhstan, NATO, within the framework of its Science for Peace subprogramme, is conducting a radiological assessment of water and ground fertility around the Sarzhal area of the Semipalatinsk region.

V. Conclusion

25. During the last two years, the international donor community has given considerable attention and delivered humanitarian and development assistance to the affected population of the Semipalatinsk region; however, because of the longer-term effects of radiation, as well as the consequences of nuclear explosions, the population remains exceptionally vulnerable and is not in a position to meet the economic, social and ecological challenges of the ongoing transition process.

26. It is important to address the compelling needs of the affected population, prioritized in the Semipalatinsk Relief and Rehabilitation Programme of the Government of Kazakhstan and emphasized by participants at the Tokyo International Conference on Semipalatinsk. The initiatives of the Government, complemented by the support of the international donor community, can only help to improve the situation of the affected population.

Notes

[1] The boundaries of the test site — the Polygon — encompass the Semipalatinsk departments of East Kazakhstan Oblast (54 per cent), Pavlodar Oblast (39 per cent) and Karaganda Oblast (7 per cent).